THE LESSONS OF HISTORY:
THE CHINESE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY AT 75

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CHAPTER 9

CONCENTRATING FORCES AND AUDACIOUS ACTION:
PLA LESSONS FROM THE SINO-INDIAN WAR

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The Sino-Indian War of 1962 is a source of great pride for China’s Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). It followed on the heels of an embarrassing Korean War campaign where China sustained heavy losses and suffered a strategic geopolitical defeat. During the Sino-Indian War, however, the PLA inflicted more damage than it suffered. According to PLA records, more than 8,000 Indian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured, while Chinese casualties barely exceeded 2,000. More importantly, China’s aggressive defense of its borders established the paramount importance of sovereignty to its national identity.

The recipe for war was familiar: a territorial dispute aggravated by excess nationalism. The partition of Kashmir, which followed the Indo-Pakistan War of 1947, resulted in a vaguely defined border between China and India. While India recognized the so-called “McMahon line,” China never formally accepted it, opting instead for the “borders of habit” that had existed between adjoining peoples for decades previous. India eventually amassed its troops along its border and orchestrated several gradual incursions that followed a “forward policy” that China characterized as a policy of “nibbling.” After failed diplomatic overtures, China pursued “audacious action,” engaging in a war of two phases. It first repelled Indian forces from the border and then penetrated deep into Indian territory to destroy India’s fighting capacity.

China’s overwhelming victory can be attributed to strong political leadership and proper use of military strategy, or campaign art (zhanyi zhudong quan). PLA records show that some 160 small unit leaders were cited for heroism while the much-maligned commissar system did not seem to adversely affect leadership hierarchy or overall morale. Furthermore, in what it characterizes as the “Counterattack in Self Defense on the China-India Border,” the PLA exhibited brilliant strategic and tactical decision-making. The PLA deployed a strong force decisively, concentrating strength
at critical points with the ultimate objective of encirclement. They also utilized the element of surprise whenever possible and took better advantage of the weather and terrain, establishing better lines of transport and communication.

The maintenance and defense of definable borders is one of the most important missions of the PLA. Indeed, the sovereignty of borders is a matter of the utmost national importance to China. And to demonstrate just how important sovereignty is to China, in the Sino-Indian War in 1962, Beijing used the PLA and “border defense troops” to demonstrate to the Indian Army that China insisted on observing the borders defined in 1959, and further, did not want to see military exercises, military patrolling, or the firing of rifles or artillery in close proximity to the border.

The PLA took a number of important lessons from its experience in the war against India in 1962. In what it characterizes for itself as the “Counterattack in Self Defense on the China-India Border,” the PLA destroyed the fighting strength and captured personnel of three brigades of the Indian Army. The Indian 7th Brigade, including its commander Brigadier Dalvi, the 62nd Brigade, and the 4th Artillery Brigade were all rendered ineffective. In addition, the PLA seriously mauled five other Indian brigades (the 11th, 48th, 65th, 67th, and 114th).

The PLA is quite proud of its record in the war, especially since it suffered such heavy losses in combat in the Korean War. China’s military historians have attributed this success to a combination of audacious action on the battlefield, good leadership, taking advantage of the terrain, good logistics, and strong ideological preparation. By “audacious action” PLA leaders mean the use of initiative and a vigorous offense. On the whole, China’s victory was characterized as an example of good strategy and strong initiative in campaign art (zhanyi zhudong quan). PLA theorists and historians point to Mao Zedong’s discussion of the need to “create local superiority in the campaign” by concentrating strength at decisive points as the inspiration for the conduct of the campaign against India.
THE BACKGROUND OF THE SINO-INDIAN WAR

After India gained independence from Britain, it was split with the formation of a Muslim-majority Pakistan in 1947. A dispute between the two new nations broke out almost immediately over the states of Jammu and Kashmir (hereafter, Kashmir), located along the northernmost part of the border with China. Although Kashmir was predominantly Muslim, at the time of the partition of India and Pakistan the region was ruled by a Hindu who opted to join India when offered the choice to align with either of the two new nations. The first India-Pakistan War of 1947 gave India control of about two-thirds of Kashmir, resulting in a shared border with China of about 600 kilometers within an already disputed piece of terrain in the western sector of the Sino-Indian border.

The Sino-Indian boundary, although not continuous, is about 2,000 kilometers long, and may be subdivided into three sectors: the east, middle, and west. The eastern sector, about 650 kilometers long, runs from the juncture of the borders of China, India, and Bhutan to the juncture of the borders of China, India, and Burma (Myanmar), with southeastern Tibet on the Chinese side and Arunachal Pradesh province on the Indian side. The middle sector extends about 450 kilometers, with the Ali administrative area of western Tibet on the Chinese side and Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh provinces on the Indian side. The 600-kilometer western sector overlaps areas of Xinjiang and western Tibet on the Chinese side, and the Ladakh Range region of Kashmir on the Indian side.

Although these three sectors of the Sino-Indian boundary have never been formally stipulated in treaty, the traditional borders took shape and were accepted by the peoples of the adjoining countries who maintained generally friendly trade relations across the borders for a long time. The eastern sector of the traditional “borders of habit” (i.e., the traditionally accepted border) was disrupted by Britain and India from time to time during the 19th century. After India’s establishment as a sovereign state in 1947, the Indian Government declared that its boundary with China, as delineated by New Delhi, had been fixed according to international treaty law, but the Chinese government disputed this.
THE SECTORS OF THE BORDER

Beginning in about 1950, the Indian Government maintained that the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian boundary was along a partially surveyed feature, “the McMahon Line.” British Foreign Secretary Henry McMahon had drawn this line during the Simla Conference held in northern India from October 13, 1913, through July 3, 1914. Representatives from British India, the new but weak Republic of China, and Tibet attended the Simla conference, which, among other goals, sought a “common understanding of the political and geographical meaning of the term Tibet.”\

The government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has never recognized either the resulting treaty or the McMahon Line. Beijing maintains that the Nationalist (Republic of China) plenipotentiary at Simla, Chen Yifan, did not sign the treaty. One British goal in 1914, the time of the Simla Conference, was to undermine both Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and the authority of its officials within Tibet.

Notwithstanding Chen Yifan’s refusal to sign the Simla Treaty, representatives of the pre-1911 Qing dynasty government and the successor Republic of China (Nationalist) government had signed a series of trade agreements and treaties concerning Tibet and the Sino-Indian border area during the period between 1865 (the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty of Sinchula, November 11, 1865) and the 1914 Simla Conference.

From the time of the establishment of the PRC in October 1949 and throughout the 1950s, India adhered to a policy that emphasized friendly relations with the PRC. Moreover, until 1950, the middle sector of the Sino-Indian boundary had been marked as “not stipulated” on official maps of India. Indeed, as late as March 1959 Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru admitted in a letter to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that no treaty had stipulated that sector of the boundary. With respect to the western sector of the border, the Indian government likewise admitted in 1959 that the specifics of the boundary had not been stipulated in an exchange of notes between local Tibetan and Kashmir authorities in 1842.

Nonetheless, despite maintaining generally friendly relations and the Indian admissions regarding the ambiguity of the border, India maintained its inherited territorial claims along the disputed border, maintained military border outposts, and involved
itself in the continuing problems China had in reestablishing its traditional control over Tibet. From early 1951 on, Indian troops took advantage of the fact that the PLA had not yet reached and consolidated all parts of its borders, and advanced north, occupying the Tawang Tract in the eastern sector of the border, but not crossing the McMahon Line. Authorities in Tibet vigorously protested but the Indian government ignored them. Then in 1953, Indian troops pushed forward from their positions, which then were called the “line of actual control,” to the McMahon Line. In doing so, they occupied about 90,000 square kilometers of territory that, although south of the McMahon Line, was claimed by Tibet.

THE OUTBREAK OF CONFLICT

On August 25, 1959 a squad of Indian troops crossed into the Longju area north of the McMahon Line and opened fire on a team of Chinese frontier guards in a village called Migyitun. The Chinese forces responded to the small arms fire, fighting back in self-defense, in the first armed clash between the two countries. The village of Migyitun was important as a place along a pilgrimage route for Tibetans. According to Neville Maxwell, McMahon had drawn his line in 1914 for the area of Migyitun in a way that did not follow the high points of topography on the map. To facilitate the pilgrimage of Tibetan Buddhists from India and maintain good relations with the Tibetans, McMahon left Migyitun inside Tibet.

In the western sector of the border, on October 21, 1959, a team of Indian troops crossed the traditional border at Kongka Pass, entering Chinese territory. Another firefight developed, during which the Indians again reportedly opened fire first, at least according to Chinese sources, wounding a Chinese frontier soldier. Although Maxwell is unsure of which side actually fired first in these incidents, he notes that the Indian Army suffered one soldier killed and one wounded at Longju.

It is also important to note that the Indian forces in these two incidents were most probably in conflict with Chinese frontier forces (or border defense units), not the PLA main force infantry divisions that were thrown against the Indian Army in 1962. This fact becomes obscured in many of the statements from China, which consistently refer to China’s frontier or border forces. The PLA at that time
(as it does today) maintained border defense units with military and public security functions that were more or less permanently assigned to patrol and outpost duties along frontiers. These were light infantry units often supported by artillery or mortars, but they did not have the same training in combat, fire support, maneuver, and communications as the main force divisions of the Chinese combat armies.

After these two clashes, the Chinese government sought a means to relax the tension and resolve the border disputes through dialogue. To prevent the armed conflict from extending or escalating into war, the Chinese government in November 1959 proposed an immediate mutual withdrawal of troops to 20 kilometers from the McMahon Line in the eastern sector of the border, and mutual withdrawal of 20 kilometers from the line of actual control in the western sector. However, Nehru and the Indian government did not respond, and Indian troops remained deployed in their forward positions. The Chinese response was a unilateral decision to withdraw its forces twenty kilometers from the line of actual control between the two countries.\(^ {23} \) In his book *India’s China War*, Neville Maxwell says of the incidents:

> After the Longju and Kongka Pass incidents of late 1959, with the realization that an intractable dispute might develop over the boundary question, the expansion of the (Indian) Army became more purposeful, and faster. In November-December 1959, 4 Division was hurriedly transferred from the Punjab to the northeast, and a new division, the 17th created.... 4 Division’s responsibility was the McMahon Line, from Bhutan to Burma, about 360 miles.\(^ {24} \)

The Indian government subsequently ordered its own forces to suspend temporarily patrols along the line of actual control. The armed forces of the two sides therefore disengaged, but the calm along the border was sustained for less than 2 years as India initiated its “forward policy” in response to domestic political pressure.

**THE “FORWARD POLICY” OF INDIA CHANGES THE SITUATION**

During early 1960 India formulated its “forward policy.”
Indian forces were to keep continuous pressure along the border, advancing its forces slowly forward to what India sought to define as the delineation, in order to change the status quo of the China-India border. In the spring of 1961, the Nehru administration, under severe pressure from the Parliament to act against China, considered conditions mature enough to implement the policy. International matters, aside from internal politics, also forced Nehru to act on the border. Part of this pressure was a result of the successful Indian military seizure of the territory of Goa from Portugal.

Neville Maxwell makes the point that the Indian Parliament did not tell Nehru to invade Goa, the last colony left on the Indian subcontinent, but that public pressure, particularly pressure from the press, led Nehru to that decision. After the successful invasion of Goa in December 1961, Nehru, Defense Minister Krishna Menon, and the Indian press and Parliament all turned their attention to the Aksai Chin and China.

Once attempts at a negotiated settlement to the border dispute had broken down after the 1959 Longju and Kongka pass incidents, the Indian government decided that its claims would have to be reinforced by continuous patrolling along the border, including active patrolling into disputed areas. Maxwell quotes this from an October 1959 editorial in the *Times of India*:

> New Delhi must assert its rights by dispatching properly equipped patrols into the areas currently occupied by the Chinese, since any prolonged failure to do so will imply a tacit acceptance of Chinese occupation, and a surrender to Peking’s threat to cross the McMahon Line in force should Indian patrols penetrate into the disputed areas of Ladakh.

Nehru’s other goal was to establish an Indian presence in the Aksai Chin area, where it was clear that China had been building roads approaching to within three miles of the border in addition to the strategic highway that served as the main line of communication for the PLA, linking far western Xinjiang with Tibet. Maxwell believes that the forward policy foreshadowed by the *Times of India* editorial began almost without discussion (he terms it a “virgin birth”) in response to the failure of talks between Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai in April 1960. Various political actors in India, including
Prime Minister Nehru, Defense Minister Menon, and chief of the General Staff of India, Lieutenant General B.M. Kaul, have all taken early credit and later disavowed responsibility for the policy.28

Whatever its origins, the forward policy of India rankled Beijing. China’s press referred to it as a policy of can shi, that is, roughly translated as a policy of “nibbling” at another country’s territory. And this is the term used by China’s negotiators in talks with India. (The ideograph for silkworm, can, is used for this image of “nibbling away;” the literal translation of can shi is food or forage for the silk worm, which would destroy a leaf or whole plant by gradually consuming it.29)

The Chinese government position was still to seek resolution of the border disputes through peaceful means, but sovereignty increasingly became a critical issue for Beijing. During the 1960s, the American Cold War containment strategy against Communism was in full swing. China had fought the United States in Korea and faced the U.S. Navy in the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954-55 and 1958. By the early 1960s, China was faced with what was seen as a “crescent” or half-moon encirclement by the United States based on its military alliances stretching from South Korea and Japan through Okinawa and the Ryukyus to Taiwan and the Philippines. China’s strategic focus, therefore, was to the east and the Western Pacific, and China could ill-afford to make an enemy of India.

Serious concerns remained for Beijing, however. The United States had modified its South Asia policy, attaching more importance to India in the Cold War. The 1959 border incidents enabled the Nehru government to approach the United States for more aid, and economic assistance grew substantially between 1959 and 1963. India also received about $60 million worth of military assistance from the United States, including aircraft and radar.30

THE GUERILLA WAR BY THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA’S SUPPORT

If the border dispute between India and China was not enough to create conditions leading to war, a continuing clandestine effort to insert guerillas into Tibet by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency
(CIA) added to the pressures on China. The CIA had worked to develop a guerilla effort in Tibet from the time of the Korean War, and India tacitly, and later between 1959 and 1962 more actively, supported this effort.\textsuperscript{31}

The CIA not only sought to have guerillas attack Chinese supply lines through Tibet, but as soon as it became clear that a military confrontation on the border between India and China was likely, guerilla forces were directed to attack Chinese supply lines. Many of the guerillas were inserted by parachute from Nepal, Eastern Pakistan, or Thailand, and few missions were successful.\textsuperscript{32} Many of the guerillas were quickly captured or killed, but certainly Beijing had increasing evidence of U.S.-Indian cooperation in the war.

A FALSE WAR OF “NIBBLING” AWAY AT CHINESE-CLAIMED TERRITORY: APRIL 1961 TO SEPTEMBER 1962

From April 1961 onward, as they implemented the “forward policy,” Indian troops regularly dispatched patrols into what China viewed as its territory and established a number of fortified points along the border. After February 1962, Indian patrolling intensified, and intrusions into areas claimed by China became more frequent. On the western sector of the boundary, Indian troops established positions on and forward of some of the strategic border passes, further penetrating into Chinese-claimed territory.

It looked to Beijing like New Delhi had embarked upon a slow process of occupation of the entire Aksai Chin. This was a region where China could least afford any compromise. As early as 1956, China had begun to build the road from Xinjiang to Tibet through the Aksai Chin, improving the existing Xinjiang-Tibet link. The road was all within Chinese territory on Chinese maps, but some 112 miles of the 750 mile-long road cut through territory claimed by India.\textsuperscript{33} India had been aware of this activity throughout the 1950s, and it was a factor prompting the forward policy. For Beijing, however, this was a vital strategic link consolidating PRC control over both Xinjiang and Tibet. The road was the main, indeed the only, developed road link along China’s western border between the two provinces.

India’s forward policy, creeping in to the proximity of the road as it did, seriously threatened the security of China’s highway and
flanked PLA border outposts, aggravating the tension on the China-India border. China’s political leaders sought to exercise restraint. Orders from the PLA’s General Staff Department to Chinese forces were that they should not open fire first and should try to avert any armed conflict with Indian troops. At the same time, the Chinese government repeated its appeals to the Indian government to resolve the border dispute through negotiations. In April 1960, Zhou Enlai made a week-long visit to India and concentrated considerable effort on resolution of the territorial disputes. The proposals put forward by the Chinese side included settling the boundary question between the two countries through discussion, while both sides refrained from patrolling along all sectors of the boundary. More meetings were held between June and December 1960, without results. From December 1961 to April 1962, the Chinese government again appealed several times to the Indian government for peaceful resolution of the border disputes, but the Indian government refused. After the diplomatic efforts failed, Chinese troops resumed the patrols within 20 kilometers inside China’s side of the line of actual control that had been suspended in November 1959.

**BEIJING’S “ANTI-NIBBLING” OPERATIONS: CHINA ISSUES RULES OF ENGAGEMENT**

In July 1962 Chairman Mao Zedong instructed the PLA on the guiding principles to counter India’s can shi zheng ce, or “nibbling policy.” Briefly stated, China’s “anti-nibbling” rules told PLA troops: “Never make a concession, but try your best to avert bleeding; form a jagged, interlocking pattern to secure the border; and prepare for long-time armed co-existence.” The PLA General Staff Department headquarters told Chinese troops to implement the rules of engagement strictly, and explained the guiding principles in greater detail:

- If Indian troops do not open fire, Chinese frontier guards should not open fire.

- If Indian troops press on toward a Chinese sentry post from one direction, Chinese frontier guards should press on towards...
the Indian stronghold from another direction.

- If Indian troops encircle Chinese frontier guards, another Chinese force should encircle the Indian troops.

- If Indian troops cut off a retreat route for Chinese forces, Chinese frontier guards should cut off the Indian troops’ retreat.

- Chinese forces should keep a distance away from Indian troops, leaving them some leeway, and withdraw if Indian forces permit withdrawal.\(^{37}\)

On the western sector of the border, Chinese frontier sentry posts formed the jagged, interlocking defense pattern designed to neutralize Indian strongholds that was suggested by Mao Zedong. On several occasions, Indian troops opened fire at Chinese forces, but the Chinese frontier guards maintained restraint. Meanwhile, the PLA implemented its own “anti-nibbling measures and special tactics.” The PLA increased both its forces and its security positions on the border, increased the size and frequency of its patrols, and established control of forward strategic positions. When PLA forces encountered Indian forces, they first fired warning shots if they believed that Indian troops were guilty of intentional provocations. Finally, they returned fire or attacked in self-defense if fighting broke out.\(^{38}\) During this “anti-nibbling” phase of hostilities, the PLA focused on the western sector of the China-India border, because the Indian forward policy was primarily intended to secure Indian claims to the Aksai Chin area.

On the eastern sector of the border, on September 9, 1962, the Indian Army gave an urgent order to some of its best troops, the Seventh Brigade of the Fourth Division, to cross the McMahon Line. The brigade occupied Kejielang (Khinzemane is the Indian name for the position), north of the McMahon Line. The Indian action was taken despite the fact that the area was marked on many Indian Army maps of the time as China’s territory. This helped lead China’s leaders to a final decision to launch a counterattack.
THE COURSE OF THE BORDER WAR

The course of what Beijing defined as a “self-defensive counterattack” can be divided into two phases. The initial reaction by China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) in September 1962 was to react rather passively to Indian incursions and any Indian presence on the Chinese side of what Beijing saw as the line of control and the disputed border. Beijing first sought only to drive invading troops back across the border. Then, later in this phase, when faced with a strong Indian military reaction, it sought to wipe them out. In the second phase, beginning in late October, Beijing sought to penetrate deeply into Indian territory to punish the Indian Army and to destroy its fighting capacity.

The First Phase.

By September 8, 1962, the headquarters of Indian Army had ordered the Seventh Brigade of its Fourth Division, commanded by Brigadier John S. Dalvi, to cross the Thag La Ridge and establish forward posts. The brigade was stationed in Kejielang, and on that day a Chinese patrol advanced toward and surrounded an Indian outpost at Dhola, which was inside Chinese territory. The Chinese force in this affair was about 60 soldiers, but the Indian post commander reported to his headquarters that he was facing a force of 600 from the PLA. The Indian Army reacted by sending more troops into the Thag La Ridge area to relieve the Dhola outpost and push back what it mistakenly believed to be a battalion-sized force of PLA. By September 14, the inaccurate report of the size of the Chinese force had been corrected, but New Delhi still went forward with its plan to evict the Chinese, since the Indian Army had already dispatched a strong reaction force and it felt assured of success.

Meanwhile, Beijing launched a diplomatic protest against the Indian advances on September 16, seeking to avoid combat. For some time, both sides engaged in a tense dance, building up their forces, occupying better positions, storing ammunition, and preparing for combat, while letters of protest and demarche were exchanged between the two capitals.

On October 10, 1962, the Indian Brigade moved against PLA
troops garrisoned about one kilometer east of Che Dong, on the Thag La Ridge. In a particularly well-coordinated and effective attack, Indian forces killed five Chinese soldiers and injured five others. Then, on October 12, Indian Prime Minister Nehru issued the order to launch an all-out attack against Chinese frontier guards on the border.

At this juncture, having been stung, China seems to have reached a decision that the provocations were no longer tolerable, especially given New Delhi’s arrogance and imperviousness to Chinese diplomatic protests. On October 16, 1962, the Chinese CMC decided on a counterattack designed to destroy Indian forces that had crossed the McMahon Line. In the western sector, according to the same order, Chinese troops were to play a supporting and coordinating role. On October 17, the CMC issued its operations order, and the General Staff Department of the PLA sought in its plans to muster and concentrate its forces for a quick, decisive battle against the Indian Army, seeking first to encircle the invading Indian troops, and then to wipe them out.

The major operational orientation of the Chinese offensive was on the eastern sector of the border, along India’s North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the McMahon Line. The PLA chose to focus on the eastern sector since this was where Indian troops had launched their own large-scale attacks starting in September 1962. Another decisive factor drove tactical orientation in the campaign toward the eastern sector: the terrain and geographical features there were more advantageous for the PLA, permitting it to attack and defeat major units of the Indian Army.

By October India had deployed the Fourth Division, three other brigades under the command of the Fourth Army, and some garrison forces on the eastern sector of the boundary — a total of about 16,000 troops. Among them, the Seventh Brigade commanded by Brigadier Dalvi had about 3,000 troops, including four infantry battalions and some supporting artillery units. Dalvi’s Seventh Brigade contained the decisive combat strength of the Fourth Division and had compiled a solid combat record in North Africa and the Middle East during the Second World War.

The Chinese assembled a smaller force of about 10,000 troops on the eastern sector, under the command of the Tibetan Military Region.
and consisting of five infantry regiments and some artillery units. In contrast to the Indian forces, however, PLA troops were acclimated to the terrain and had better roads and supply lines approaching the border. On October 20 the PLA began its counterattack against the Indian troops, focusing on Kejielang north of the McMahon Line. At 7:30 am, Chinese artillery began 15 minutes of preparatory shelling, destroying Indian artillery positions and parts of Indian fortifications. Chinese infantry then broke through the Indian fortifications. Within 1 day, the PLA wiped out the Indian Seventh Brigade and captured its commander Brigadier Dalvi. One day later, the PLA forces again crossed the McMahon Line, recovering the area around Zimithang.43

Chinese troops counterattacked simultaneously on the western sector of the border, where by October the Indian Army had deployed about 6,000 troops, including the 114th Brigade with six battalions. Of these forces, about 1,300 Indian troops had been stationed in some 40 strongholds or outposts placed in what China viewed as its own territory. In response, China had deployed about 6,300 troops, including two infantry regiments, some independent battalions, and supporting artillery units, forces that operated under the command of the Kangxiwa Headquarters of the Xinjiang Military Region. At 8:25 a.m. on October 20, Chinese troops initiated a general artillery barrage assault and followed with an infantry assault on the Indian positions. The first Indian stronghold was captured in only eighty minutes, according to Chinese archives.44 The PLA then followed up with a series of actions against each of the Indian garrisons, surrounding them and eliminating them one after another. By October 29, Chinese troops had mopped up all of the Indian strongholds around the banks of Pangong Lake, eliminated parts of the four Indian battalions that made up the 114th Brigade, and recovered 1,900 square kilometers of Chinese territory. The Indian Army was beaten by a force that left itself free to maneuver, even in that difficult terrain, while the Indians had tied themselves down to fixed, dispersed outposts, much as the Nationalist Army had done in the Chinese Civil War.45

The Second Phase.

While Chinese forces were engaged in combat in both the eastern
and western sectors of the border, Beijing still sought a negotiated solution. On October 24 the Chinese Foreign Ministry proposed three measures to resolve the border dispute and end the combat.\(^{46}\) The Nehru administration, however, prodded to war by the Indian press and encouraged by American and Russian support, refused the proposals. The result was that by November 6, 1962, despite a vigorous counteroffensive called Operation LEGHORN, the PLA prevailed over the Indian Army.\(^{47}\)

In mid-November 1962, the Indian government declared a state of national emergency throughout the country.\(^{48}\) After intensive activity involving the movement of major Indian military forces, about 50,000 Indian troops had been sent as reinforcements to the China-Indian border, including a corps headquarters for command and control, the headquarters of three divisions, and 14 maneuver brigades subordinate to the respective division headquarters. The focus was still on the eastern sector where the Indian Army deployed about 22,000 troops, commanded by the corps headquarters; they made up three divisions, with a total of eight brigades. In all, India deployed 28 battalions to the border. Among them, the Fourth Division with its five brigades (including 15 battalions), which had a total strength of about 15,000 soldiers, was deployed in the area from the southern bank of Tawang River to Tezpur.\(^{49}\)

To counter the Indian deployments, the PLA General Staff Department (GSD) sent two more divisions into Tibet. According to the noted historian of the PLA, William Whitson, both of these divisions came from the 46th Corps (or Army, since a PLA army at that time was equivalent to an Indian corps).\(^{50}\) The GSD-directed deployment increased Chinese troop strength on the eastern sector of the border to five somewhat understrength divisions — in total, about 25,000 soldiers. With these deployments complete, the CMC on November 12, 1962, ratified the PLA second phase plan of operation. Chinese troops were to begin an offensive designed to wipe out three to four Indian brigades, including the brigades in the Tawang Tract and the single brigade in Walong, also in the eastern sector near Burma. In the western sector, the operations plan called for the PLA to eliminate the invading Indian troops in strongholds in the area of Pangong Lake.\(^{51}\)

On the morning of November 16, 1962, Chinese troops began a general counterattack against eastern sector Indian troops, starting
in Walong. By that evening, Chinese troops had seized Walong and wiped out more than 1,200 Indian troops. Then on November 18 the PLA launched a second successful eastern sector counteroffensive in the Se La-Bomdi La area. This effectively eliminated the strength and combat capability of most of three Indian brigades and recovered a great deal of Chinese territory south of the McMahon Line. Chinese troops reached a point about 30 kilometers from Tezpur, an important town in the eastern sector, and were faced by only an Indian battalion deployed north of Tezpur.

India had increased its troop strength to 15,000 on its western sector after its losses in the first phase of the war. The PLA launched its second phase western sector offensive on the morning of November 18, and by the morning of November 20, Chinese troops had wiped out all six Indian strongholds west of Spangur Lake.52

**CHINA ANNOUNCES A UNILATERAL CEASE-FIRE**

Under the circumstances, China had full capacity to realize the boundary it claimed, but Beijing exercised restraint. Zhou Enlai called the Indian *charge d'affaires* in Beijing to his residence on November 19 and informed him that, effective November 21, Chinese forces would cease fire; on December 1, Zhou said, Chinese forces would withdraw 20 kilometers from the line of actual control all along the disputed border.53 For some reason, as reported by Maxwell based on his review of Indian archives, the *charge d'affaires* seems to have delayed a full day reporting this matter to New Delhi. As a consequence, India first learned of the Chinese cease-fire from an announcement made in Beijing before midnight on November 20.54 Chinese troops ended the hostilities on November 21 and began an orderly withdrawal as promised along the entire border to positions 20 kilometers behind the line of actual control as determined in November 1959. These actions, in the Chinese view, reflected efforts to resolve the dispute peacefully and restore friendly relations. The disengagement of the armed forces of the two sides and the formation of a de facto 20 kilometer-wide demilitarized zone proved a positive step that has helped to maintain a peaceful border to this day. Moreover, Beijing’s actions laid a foundation for the eventual improvement of relations during the late 1980s to mid 1990s.
LESSONS OF COMBAT LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNIST PARTY ACTIVITIES

Senior Chinese leaders argue that a major lesson of the Sino-Indian War is that the strong political leadership of the Communist Party contributed significantly to China’s victory. In Western military literature, one of the main critiques of the PLA’s political commissar system, and the function of the political commissar in a PLA unit, is that the political commissar system interferes with or usurps the duties of the commander. If this is true, the political commissar system, and the General Political Department (GPD) of the PLA that runs it, can be a hindrance in combat, preventing decisive action and costing lives. Senior PLA leaders deny that this is the case. Instead, they argue that the GPD and the political commissar system is a source of inspiration and esprit d’corps that helps the commander under the most difficult combat conditions.

One way to understand leadership style in the PLA and to gain some understanding of the role of the party member or political commissar is to look at the results of combat. Are PLA commanders leading? Are political commissars out doing the job of the commander leading troops in combat? Casualty rates and awards for heroism give some hint of the answer to these questions. An examination of one case study from the Sino-Indian War provides empirical evidence that supports the claims of senior PLA officers.55

The PLA showed great acumen in carefully executing the campaign according to the guidelines formulated by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Military Commission: 1) “to beat Indian troops soundly,” and 2) “to wipe out the invading Indian forces totally and rapidly.”56 According to PLA records from archives, Indian casualties during the war were 4,897 killed or wounded and 3,968 captured.57 The Indian Defense Ministry, in 1965, showed 1,383 Indian soldiers killed, 1,696 missing in action, 3,968 soldiers captured, and 1,047 soldiers wounded.58 In comparison, PLA casualties in the war were quite small, with 722 Chinese soldiers killed and 1,697 wounded.59 In addition, no soldier of the PLA was captured during the war, a rarity in the history of warfare.60 The PLA did all of this damage to the Indian Army with the equivalent of a reinforced corps (army), deployed and massed at the critical points along the border.61
In that war, according to an appendix of the PLA history of the “self-defensive counterattack,” some 327 soldiers and officers of the Chinese force were given awards for heroism. Over half of these awards were given to members of the Chinese Communist Party or, in the case of younger soldiers, the Communist Youth League. This is a small case from which to extrapolate the data, but it seems clear that, unless party affiliation was a criterion for being considered a hero, the PLA’s claims that CCP membership and the existence of the political commissar system may help build esprit d’corps. Moreover, it is clear that Chinese military leaders lead from the front and Communist Party members seem to follow them and emerge as leaders. That is, a substantial number of small unit leaders, whether squad leaders or platoon and company grade-officers, were given awards for heroism in combat. In fact, some 160 small unit leaders were cited for heroism, of which 114 were CCP members. Among basic soldiers, 158 “fighters” and medics were given awards, of which 54 were party members. Only three political commissars or political directors got awards.

These data are limited, and it is generally not a good idea to generalize from one case. But this may be the best case from which to work, since the PLA has not published all of its combat records and records of decorations for bravery in the public domain. That said, the examination of the combat decorations given for bravery in the Sino-Indian War suggests that PLA leaders lead from the front. Party membership seems to result in leadership behaviors in other situations, and the responsibility that seems to flow from being part of an elite organization like the communist party appears to make soldiers and leaders take greater risk. The work of the GPD in promoting unit lineage and history probably also contributes to the willingness of ordinary soldiers and leaders to take extraordinary risks. The award data seem to imply that political commissars, directors and instructors, if one can extrapolate from this single case, stay out of the way of the commander in combat. They may not have been a hindrance, but the data don’t decisively prove they help. The GPD is changing its role, however. It is studying the ways that Western militaries build morale and esprit as well as the personnel, retirement, and legal systems of other armed forces.
LESSONS FROM COMBAT

One of the fundamental precepts in PLA literature on the Sino-Indian War is that troops should execute sudden attacks or counterattacks to catch the enemy unprepared (Turan faqi fanji shi Yinjun cuo shou bu ji). That is, the PLA values surprise. Second, PLA tactics emphasized the rapid concentration of force at decisive points to surround enemy forces and defeat them in detail (Jizhong youshi bingli).

PLA histories also emphasize that the superior knowledge of the terrain and the region by Chinese border troops and reinforcing main forces gave them the ability to take advantage of difficult terrain. For example, the PLA was able to operate more effectively in deep valleys and densely forested areas, in darkness, or when cloud or mist obscured visibility. PLA histories also take note of the need to be flexible in applying traditional warfighting and altering tactics and doctrine because of the complexity of the terrain and the weather. One way that the PLA adapted quickly to the challenges posed by the terrain was to advance on parallel routes to one point of attack. This was a tactic in the Sino-Japanese War, such as in the Hundred Regiments Campaign.

The establishment and decisive use of a relatively strong reserve by battalion and regimental-sized units was also a significant lesson the PLA took from the war. The use of reserves at the proper time contributed to the ability to mass combat power quickly and decisively at important points on the battlefield. As a general rule, "PLA border forces were able to mass three and one-half to four times the combat power of Indian forces at the decisive point of combat." Massing fire effectively was also a critical factor in combat. At one point cited in the PLA history, an Indian platoon surrendered to a seven-man squad that concentrated its fire at the decisive place and time. At another point, five platoons of the PLA concentrated at the right point forced the surrender of an Indian infantry battalion.

Throughout the first phase of the war the PLA believed that Indian forces generally enjoyed the advantage of better lines of transport and better communications in the rear area. They believed that this was because during the period of executing the "forward policy" the Indian Army had developed an effective infrastructure
along the border. The lesson the PLA took to the second phase of the war was to work harder at coordinating more carefully among its own arms and support services. 69

The PLA adjusted the military force employed in a particular situation to the terrain and the Lines of Communication available. This was especially critical in the west, which was harder to resupply. Thus the classic formula of METT (mission, enemy, terrain, and troops) is one that the PLA values as a consideration in combat as much as any western army. 70 In the east, mobility in difficult terrain was the most important factor. Indian forces in this area feared most the ability of the PLA to flank them, surround them, and take away Indian lines of communication and re-supply. 71 The 11th Infantry Division of the PLA, especially, was able to run effective combat operations against the Indian Army through aggressive combat reconnaissance that ultimately isolated Indian positions, surrounded Indian forces, and caused them to collapse in such situations.

The PLA was able to exploit the difficult terrain and the large gaps between Indian forces through the maneuver of small units that eventually surrounded Indian outposts and combat positions. The PLA thus planned to divide the Indian positions into segments and take them one at a time. 72

The PLA focused on attacking both flanks of an isolated unit, rolling it up from the flanks in a double envelopment, while pinning down the center with automatic weapons and mortar fire. Units then collapsed if taken by surprise in such an attack.

CONCLUSIONS

The lessons the PLA takes from the Sino-Indian War reinforce the most enduring principles of war: surprise, mass, maneuver, and use of terrain and weather. For the PLA, the terrain and the weather conditions made it extremely important that its forces focus on tactical movement, careful campaign planning, coordinated logistics, and effective command and control. 73

The political leadership of the Central Military Commission was cited as extremely important in ensuring that the use of military initiative created the political conditions conducive to resolving the
conflict on Beijing’s terms in the “diplomatic struggle.”74

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 9


2. The Chinese government complained to India that on August 25, 1959, Indian troops opened fire on Chinese border patrols troops. This period also began the start of New Delhi’s “Forward Policy,” which pushed Indian forces toward borders recognized by India and increasingly pressured Chinese border forces to move away from contested areas. This incident led to a series of exchanged between Chinese Premier Shout Inlay and Indian Prime Minister Nehru on the mutual border, patrolling, and demarcation. Deng Lifeng, *Zhong-Yin Bianzheng (The Sino-Indian Border War)*, Department of History, Academy of Military Science, China, on http://argo.virtualave.net/_private/wars/zhiyin.htm.

3. Specifically, the Chinese position was that there should be no shooting or patrolling within 30 kilometers of the border and no military exercises within 20 kilometers. Ma Zhenfa, *Bianfang Lun*, p. 119.


9. This section of the chapter draws on a paper prepared by Zheng Feng and Larry M. Wortzel for a conference hosted by the Center for Naval Analysis on PLA warfighting. That chapter is scheduled for publication as chapter 8 of a book on


11. Of note, several key leaders of India at the time of the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 were from Kashmir, including the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru; Defense Minister Krishna Menon; and the commander of Indian forces in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Lieutenant General B. M. Kaul.

12. In the view of China, which, after the 1911 revolution, had yet to regain traditional Chinese influence in Tibet, the Tibetan representative accepted the McMahon Line only secretly and under pressure from Mr. McMahon. McMahon put the map with the Line on it in the appendix of the Simla Treaty and the Chinese view is that the Chinese representative did not accept the McMahon Line and did not sign the Treaty formally during the Simla Conference. No Chinese government has ever recognized the McMahon Line and the Simla Treaty. An excellent description of the history of the McMahon Line and the process of the Simla Conference may be found in Neville Maxwell, *India’s China War*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1970; Bombay: JAICO House, 1971, pp. 39-64. The quote is from Alistair Lamb, *The McMahon Line: A Study in Relations Between India, China and Tibet, 1904-1914*, two volumes, Vol. 1, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 3.


14. Lamb, *The McMahon Line*, pp. 3-9. In the late years of a weakened Qing dynasty, the British-sponsored Sikkim Convention of 1890-1893 had defined Tibetan boundaries and established commercial relations with British India, and in 1904 Tibet and Great Britain signed an Anglo-Tibetan Convention.


18. Neville Maxwell, *India’s China War*, p. 73.


39. Ibid.


43. Ibid., pp. 121-134.

44. Ibid., pp. 134-139.

45. Ibid., p. 139; Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 356-359.


47. Maxwell, pp. 366-373.


52. Ibid., p. 180-185.


54. Ibid., p. 417.


57. Ibid., p. 185.

58. Ibid.


63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., pp. 398-400.


67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 399-400.

69. Ibid., p. 400.
70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., p. 401.

72. Ibid., p. 402.

73. Ibid., pp. 403-404.

74. Ibid., p. 400.